

The Ohio State University
Department of Art

Digital Painting and Narrative in the Fine Arts Context

Kelsey Shankle
Advisor: Laura Lisbon
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I. INTRODUCTION

This research project began with the goal to create a body of digital paintings that investigate the concept of narrative, while also exploring digital art in a fine arts context. The intention was to isolate screenshots from films and use them as inspiration for digital paintings. Thus, the project investigated film, painting, digital art, and our perception of narrative imagery. Through this process, I hoped to understand how narrative functioned differently between a time-based media like film and a still image. Simultaneously, I would be exploring the differences and similarities between digital and traditional painting.

To understand the nature of this project, it is important to understand the tools used. Digital painting can be defined as the creation of art using techniques similar to traditional painting, but implemented through computer programs with virtual canvases and brushes. Although a computer mouse can be used for the creation and manipulation of these images, many artists use graphic tablets that plug into their computers. A graphics tablet allows the artist to draw on its surface with a stylus, translating these movements to the screen.

II. PROCESS

My painting process throughout the project remained largely the same; most changes and developments occurred conceptually rather than technically, although I became much more acclimated and adept with these techniques as time progressed.

To begin a painting, I would first select a film or television show from which to source my imagery. My selection process was largely based on choosing a film or show I found visually compelling. The hypothesis was that visually interesting images are much more likely to suggest narrative elements.

Next, I would watch the film with the volume off, focusing purely on visuals. I did not want my selection to be based on the narrative of the film, but on visuals that were narratively compelling on their own. The image was intended to function completely separately from the film. Throughout the film I would take low-quality

screenshots whenever I saw an interesting composition, resulting in nearly a hundred screenshots per film.

I would now begin to pare the screenshots down. In the beginning my selections were based purely on intuition, whether an image seemed interesting or not. When I would get down to a handful of images I would begin to analyze more closely what I thought the images suggested on their own. Did they suggest certain themes or stories if one divorced them from their source material? Based on these questions, I would finally select the strongest screenshot. I would typically crop the image at this point to create a more satisfying composition, which also separated it further from the film by removing the normal cinematic framing and dimensions.

From this point on, I used the digital imaging software Photoshop CS5 for all sketching and painting. At the beginning of the project I used a Wacom Bamboo Create as my digital drawing tablet, and after I received project funding I purchased a Wacom Cintiq 22HD tablet. This allowed for greater precision, because the Cintiq has a screen you draw directly on with your stylus. This differs from most tablets where you draw on a separate surface while looking at your computer screen.

The next step was to create a sketch in Photoshop based on the selected screenshot. This was just a basic sketch to capture the composition and forms. I looked at the screenshot while sketching but did not trace it, because I wanted my piece to be a separate interpretation of the source material. Just as many traditional painters do, I selected a single color with which I filled the background with set the basic undertones of the painting.

Next came the actual painting process. One advantage of digital painting is that the user can easily create dozens of separate layers to draw on. This makes it easy to edit or completely delete individual parts of a piece. For my purposes however, I worked completely on one layer (besides the sketch layer, which I kept separate.) This was a deliberate choice because I was coming to digital painting from a traditional painting background and wanted to see how this affected my decisions.

To begin, I laid in flat colors with a 100% opacity brush (opacity affects how “much” color is put on the digital canvas with each stroke, and brush shapes can be manipulated or created by the user for specific shapes and textures.) For instance, I put in

a base color for all the areas of skin. This step helped begin the palette choosing process, as I adjusted my palette throughout based on instinct rather than trying to perfectly imitate the palette of the source material. The fact that my instincts were developed in my traditional painting practice affected this process.

Now I started actually shading, adding highlights, etc. I painted fast and loose with the full image onscreen to begin with, so that I could get basic shapes starting to develop. Once I had made enough progress to be able to distinguish each area of the painting on a basic level, usually after a few hours, I deleted the sketch layer so that all I was left with was my painting layer. From this point I started to zoom in on specific areas and develop them individually, such as the face of a figure or a car seat. At times I was zoomed in up to 200% so that I could work on very fine details, and it often felt as if I was crawling across the top of the image. Periodically I would zoom out to see how the painting was developing as a whole.

At the end of the piece I would usually do one more pass over each area to fine tune details. A “finished” piece for me was the one existing in the digital world, on the screen, but it was possible to print the piece out at a variety of sizes or project it on the wall. However the intended venue for these pieces was the internet, where potentially anyone could access them.

III. PIECES

In total, I produced eight pieces for this project, four from film references and four from television references.

The first (fig. 1) was referenced from a screenshot of the film *Reservoir Dogs*. This particular scene was chosen because of the emotional intensity of the character's expression coupled with the violence of his wound and another character's hand jutting from the front scene to hold his hand tightly. The coupling of these elements seemed to me to leave quite a few scenarios that the viewer might project, and composition was unusual and dynamic.



Fig. 1. Shankle, Kelsey. *Bleed Out*. 2015. Photoshop CS5.

The second piece (fig. 2) comes from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Instead of *Reservoir Dogs*' gritty violence I saw its imagery as fraught with tension of a more psychological nature. The painting expresses this in the largely red color palette and the mysterious harsh lighting, and once again the character's expression played a key role in suggesting something temporal beyond this single image.



Fig. 2. Shankle, Kelsey. *I'm Afraid*. 2015. Photoshop CS5.

Painting three (fig. 3) is from *Psycho*. The shift to a black and white palette was an interesting change for me. Like *2001*, I found the most visually intriguing moments in this film to be based on psychology rather than explicit action. Thus, this painting shows a slightly angled shot of the character from below with a blurred taxidermy owl looming behind him. His face is unreadable.

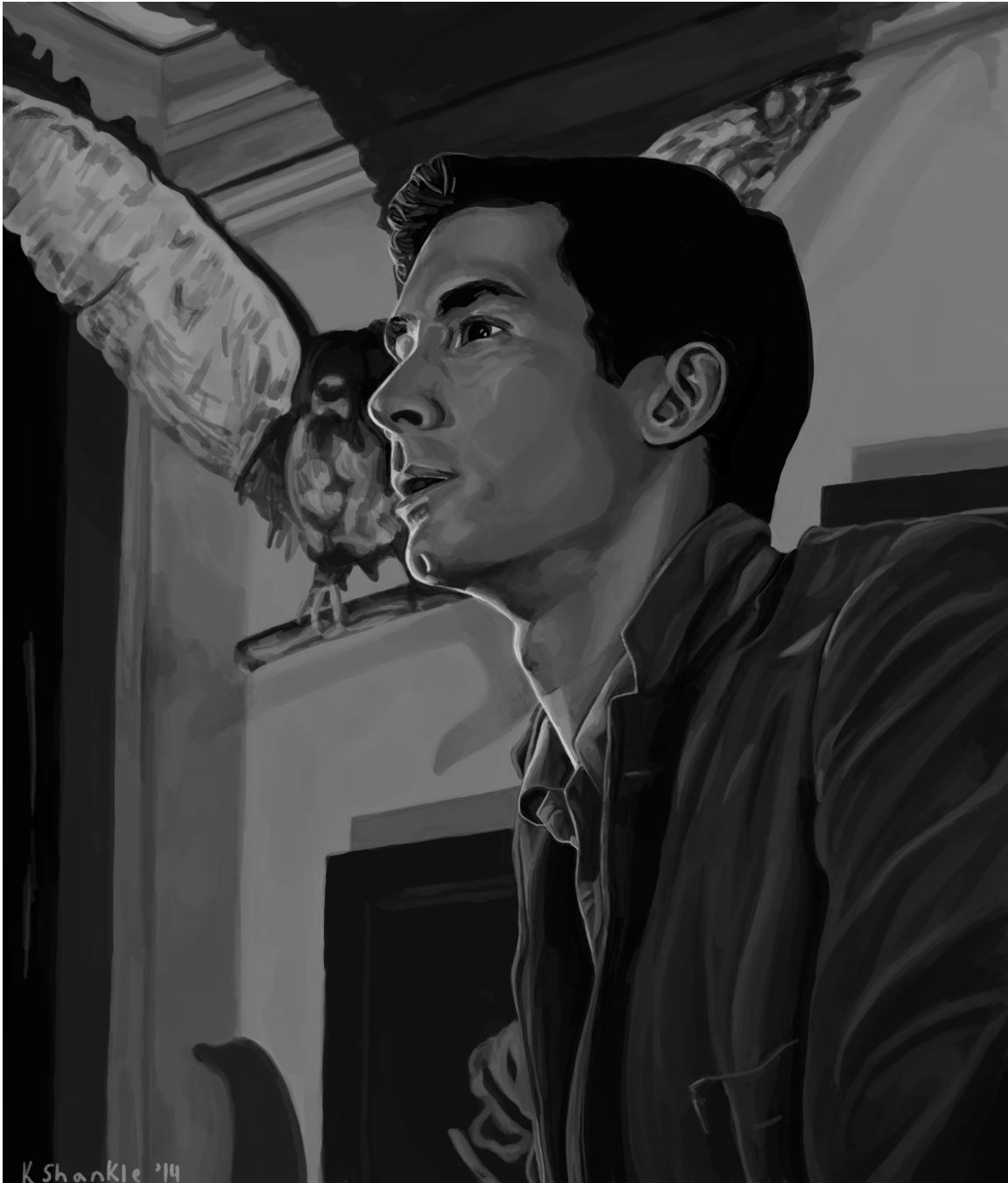


Fig. 3. Shankle, Kelsey. *Like One of His Stuffed Birds*. 2015. Photoshop CS5.

The fourth painting (fig. 4) references *The Royal Tenenbaums*. It is a return to color, and also to overt violence. The palette is overwhelmingly cool and blue, a fact I magnified purposefully, and the character is caught in a strange pose after having (apparently) cut his wrists. His face is covered in shaving cream. Although this references a specific narrative point in the film I found these strange visual circumstances functioned equally well on their own, compelling in a different way.



Fig. 4. Shankle, Kelsey. *Needle in the Hay*. 2015. Photoshop CS5.

The fifth piece (fig. 5) marks my turn to television shows for imagery, this time with the television show *Hannibal*. The character hangs in the middle from a noose, posed Christ-like, with cuts along his wrists. The background is not as obvious as in previous pieces, so the questions it raises for the viewer come almost solely from how the character came to be in this position.



Fig. 5. Shankle, Kelsey. *Crucify*. 2015. Photoshop CS5.

Piece number six (fig. 6) draws from the show *Twin Peaks*. It shows a side-view of a man driving a car, speaking into a tape-recorder held with one hand. Through the window we see blurred trees and a bright almost colorless sky. For me this image was about the relation of the various objects to each other, the provocative arrangement coupled with a low-saturated palette.



Fig. 6. Shankle, Kelsey. *I Like it Here*. 2015. Photoshop CS5.

The seventh painting (fig. 7) comes from the series *True Detective*, and in the foreground shows a blindfolded figure with strange twigs and antlers in her hair. Kneeling behind her against a grey sky is a man in a suit. In this piece it is both the unusual imagery and implied violence that suggest some narrative and require the viewer to draw conclusions about the relationship of the two characters.

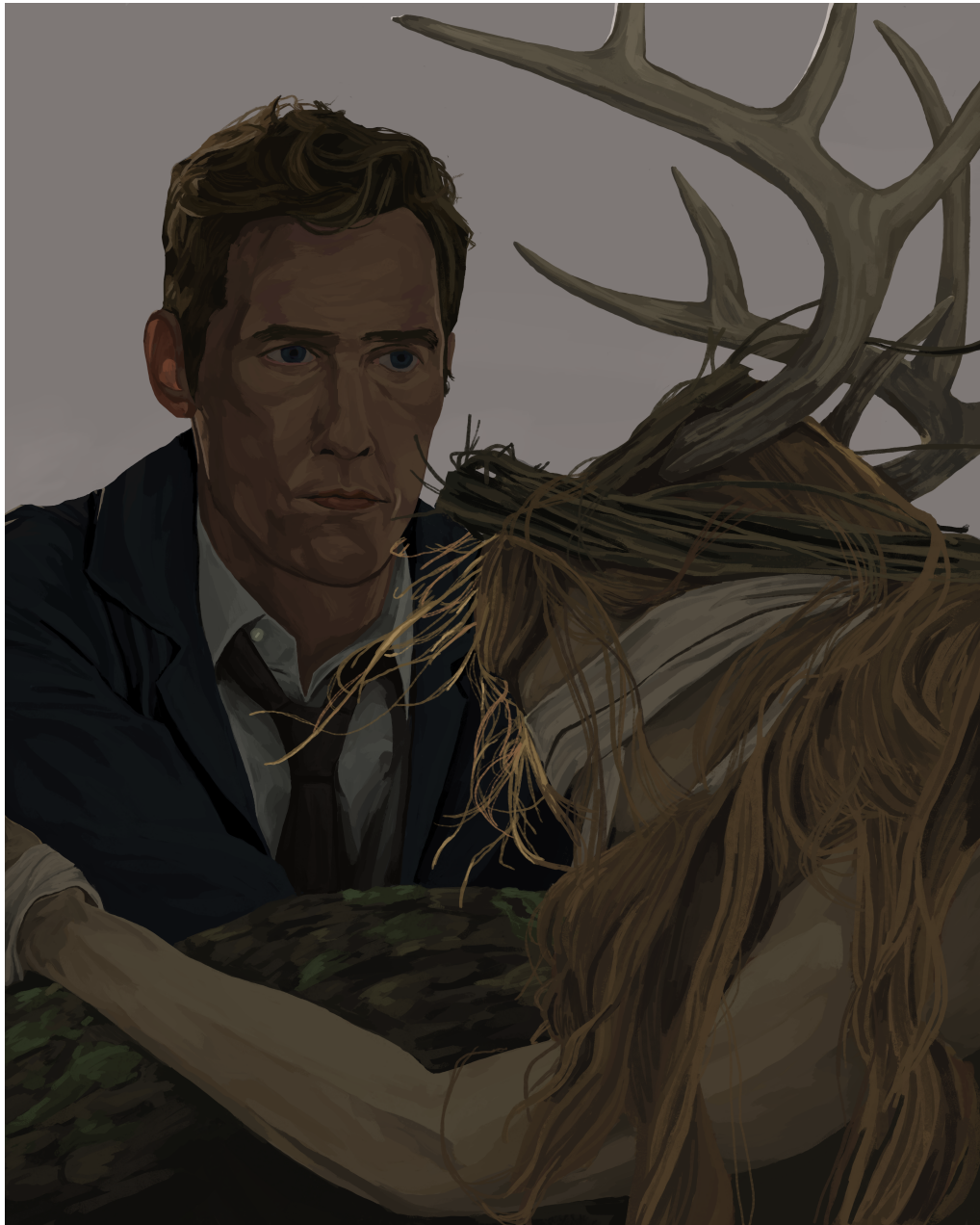


Fig. 7. Shankle, Kelsey. *We Keep the Other Bad Men From the Door*. 2015.

Photoshop CS5

My final piece (fig. 8) is from the first episode of the original *Twilight Zone* series, a black-and-white image to compliment the black-and-white *Psycho* painting. This piece focuses on the unusual arrangement of the people pictured; a man kneeling against something, wires connected to his temples, two people whose faces we can not see reaching to grab him. Are they helping, or hurting? His expression is the only one visible, leaving much to the viewer to suggest.



Fig. 8. Shankle, Kelsey. *Where Is Everybody?* 2015. Photoshop CS5.

IV. THEMES

As I continued my work, a variety of themes arose. Some I had intended to work with from the start, but others surfaced subconsciously before I chose to develop them. Some are visual and others are purely conceptual, but together they helped to enrich my project substantially.

To begin with, I found myself sharpening my paintings compared to the pictures they were referenced from, making them clearer with more distinct edges. This was partially deliberate in that I was consciously altering the source material, but by doing this repeatedly it became a distinct theme I found I should examine.

Film blurs images for many reasons. The “focus” of a shot is a deliberate choice, making certain areas (such as the foreground) distinct while the rest of the shot is slightly blurred. This mimics the function of our own eyes, where objects on the periphery are less distinct. It’s much rarer for “deep focus” to be used, which places all objects in the same range of clarity.

Focus is an important filmmaking tool that can be used to beautiful effect. But in taking my images from a time-based medium and placing them wholly in the “now,” in the single image, my instinct was largely to eradicate it. Even areas that I’ve blurred comparatively (such as the owl in the *Psycho* painting,) are markedly sharper than they were in the film. I believe this action on my part came from my desire to divorce the image from the world of film. I didn’t want them to feel cinematic, necessarily, and sharpening was a way of altering them that simultaneously emphasized areas in my image that are lost in the original.

Narrative was one of my main themes from conception to finish. I was interested in working with how a viewer draws meaning from still imagery. While my source material came from the temporal medium of film and television, my paintings would rely on still images to convey some story to the reader.

From the beginning I wished to leave these readings ambiguous; the goal was to view how my audience responded to the imagery instead of guiding them towards a particular interpretation. This was the reason why my choice of film stills (discussed above,) depended on loose ideas of what I found visually interesting, rather than a more

rigid selection process. I depended the most on the human expressions in each piece as clues for the viewer to interpret.

My paintings weren't necessarily cinematic in and of themselves, but it became obvious that my viewers recognized them as pop culture references whether they had seen the source material or not. The paintings may have cut out the actual narrative of the films, but they maintained a visual language of tropes; trappings of sci-fi, or detective procedurals, or dramatized horror.

It became clear that it was difficult for the viewer to connect or sympathize with the paintings' subjects *because* of these cinematic indicators, even though film characters are easily empathized with when watching the full movie. Yet in these still images, they became removed, placed in a different and inaccessible world. Despite this wall, or perhaps because of it, people still expressed wonder at what was happening, what had occurred before or after the painted instant.

This was exactly what I had hoped for. The paintings were seen as related to film, but not dependent on it. They had been excised and altered, and had been given their own existence. People were bringing their own experiences and expectations to the piece, and while to an extent film and television can be left to interpretation, their story cannot. My project, however, absolutely could. In a way I see it as similar to a film trailer, or a promotional poster. You see these snippets of a film and gain an expectation for what you will experience, the possible narrative, tone, etc. But in the end we always come out of a viewing with something that the promotional materials did not convey, or conveyed differently. It is not necessarily "fuller," it is just more definite.

Violence emerged as another factor in my work. It is present in half of the paintings I created. Violence is of course an indisputable presence in film and television, so it seemed natural that it should emerge in my work. In the same way it is often used in those mediums, I used violent images for their provocative qualities. They seemed, to me, to clearly create a question of what had happened or would happen to these people, because we respond strongly to the idea of our bodies as finite objects. Though violence in the media became a theme, there is no distinct commentary on it in my work, only a presentation of its existence.

Gender started as an unconscious choice before becoming a deliberate one. After completing my first few paintings, I realized that I was painting characters of a similar background, all white middle-aged males. I realized I should be thoughtful about these patterns. Men, particularly white men, make up an overwhelming majority of main roles in television and cinema, particularly those we consider iconic. They have become the default.

I decided that I wanted to continue painting exclusively men to highlight this. It was not necessarily a commentary (though I personally think this trend is a negative one,) but again was meant only to make the viewer conscious of the role race and gender play in popular culture. For example, even though *Psycho* features women as two of the main roles, it is ultimately Anthony Perkins' portrayal of Norman Bates that most people remember most strongly. Thus my choice of subject matter when creating a *Psycho* based piece. The only time that a woman appears in my paintings is in the piece referenced from the show *True Detective*, and in that case she is more of a prop than a character, a naked and trussed up corpse that the male lead stares at pensively. The antlers, blindfold, and thorns that have been attached to her body solidify her role as set dressing.

Perhaps not surprisingly, most people did not notice this theme when viewing my paintings as a group. They did not notice that all of the characters were white or male, at least not on any meaningful level. The only viewers that questioned this choice tended to be art professors I presented to, who have some predisposition to critical analysis of a work and who have certainly seen many other works that interact with the subject of gender.

Finally, the role of digital painting in the world of fine arts was a key point of interest in my project. Although technology has been used in fine arts from the beginning, digital painting specifically is largely ignored. It is used most typically by illustrators and other "industry" artists. By employing it in my project I wanted to explore its potential as a tool in the painting world, and to exhibit its relevance.

V. RELATED ARTISTS

While working on my project I found it necessary to look at other artists that were working with similar subjects. I believe that this helped provide a larger context for my work to fit into, so it seems necessary to record some of these artists here.

One artist who was brought to my attention by my research advisor is Christian Tomaszewski and his 2007 installation piece “On Chapels, Caves, and Erotic Mystery.” The piece is a recreation of objects and sets from David Lynch’s cult classic *Blue Velvet*, some in miniature, and shows a similar preoccupation with film’s place in popular culture when compared to my own work. It’s worth noting that my *Twin Peaks*, one of the sources for my paintings, is another David Lynch creation. Like my paintings, Tomaszewski is extrapolating from an existing source, changing medium and detail to alter meaning and context. His focus on minute detail is another similarity. Of course, Tomaszewski seems much more concerned with space and the world of the film, whereas my focus was on narrative suggestiveness.

The photographer Gregory Crewdson seems to be working in a similar vein of surreal cinematic narrative. Although his photographs aren’t sourced from film, they focus on setting, lighting, and narrative implications in a very cinematic manner. Like my work, this is another approach rooted in cinema that is being employed in a separate medium (although many might consider photography the “bones” of cinema.) Crewdson also focuses on surreal and disturbing moments to create compelling imagery, as I did in several of my pieces.

Cindy Sherman’s work in photography also provided some inspiration in terms of composition and imagery. *Untitled Film Stills* is a series of photographs in which Sherman inserts herself into “scenes” as a fictional actress, creating images that appear to be stills from a film. Sherman is using cliché and the popular culture aspect of cinema as an artistic language, to great affect. Although this series of works tackles many issues that my own work is not concerned with, the use of cinema as a visual language struck a chord.

German artist Jan-Hendrik Pelz works in a structure similar to mine, though in oil paint. Like my pieces, Pelz bases his paintings off of film stills, although he does not crop the shot in any way. He also pulls these stills from points in the film based on five

random numbers he requests from friends. This adds chance into the mix instead of the deliberate nature of my own selections. Pelz also seems much more concerned with directly reproducing the shots in terms of color and form, whereas I deliberately alter these elements to remove them from the original still.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This project proved to be a fascinating way to explore the intersections of digital art, painting, and film. Examining the way viewers interacted with my works and interpreted the narratives proved to be the most enlightening part of the process, as I came to understand the preconceptions people bring with them to pop-culture based artwork.

Although I have completed the eight paintings I set out to make, I believe this project is worth continuing in the future. Specifically, I wish to further explore the themes of gender and violence I have discussed above. Creating more paintings that depict these themes should allow them to be further teased out, or at least amplify their effect.

In the end, I discovered much about the differences in traditional painting and digital paintings. I also became aware of the different ways narrative can be employed in imagery, as well as its separate functions in time-based works and single image works.